

FAITH, SCEPTICISM AND AGNOSTICISM

An analysis of Professor Paul Elmer More's *The Sceptical Approach to Religion*

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The Agnostic, it is safe to say, reads very few books on Religion. He knows that he will find nothing new, important, or thought-provoking in such books, and he believes, with Thomas H. Huxley, that certain questions are settled and closed and that the principle of open-mindedness does not require us periodically to reopen such questions in the absence of new evidence of sufficient weight and intellectual gravity which honest thinkers cannot possibly ignore.

Since the death of the great Agnostics—Huxley, Tyndall, Spencer, to name no others—nothing has been said either by theologians or metaphysicians and philosophers that has tended, in the smallest degree, to oppress or impress the intelligent and cultivated adherents of the school they founded. The growth of Agnosticism is, of course, a salient and significant fact of the times. But the Agnostic will do well to make an exception of one very recent and rather small book on religion—namely, Professor Paul Elmer More's *The Sceptical Approach to Religion*. Here is a work which, by its candor, apparent reasonableness, appeal to alleged fact and universal experience, and keen logic, challenges the attention of the confirmed Agnostic and leads him to search his soul and to put certain serious questions to his trained and disciplined mind.

Professor More has great respect for the genuine sceptic and endeavors to convince him without question-begging and, as he claims, without departing from the truly scientific method of investigation and argumentation. The sceptic, if he is consistent, courageous, and adventurous, thinks Professor More, should and must accept Faith or Religion.

This, clearly, is a remarkable affirmation, and it will be both profitable and enjoyable to examine it with some thoroughness.

But first let us note Professor More's definition and characterization of the sceptic. Many, he avers, who probably imagine themselves to be sceptics, are nothing of that sort. They are merely indifferent, timid, mentally indolent, superficial in dealing with

great problems. Such persons Professor More leaves out of his reckoning, for, as he says, he simply does not understand them. They have no curiosity in respect of the cosmos, of human destiny, of the meaning of life, and seem to him to be deficient in that essential quality which distinguishes man as man. They may be estimable, gifted, eminent, useful, but they are not fully or truly human.

The sceptic, says Professor More, is one whose faculties are alert, who is bound to feel the force of the dilemma which confronts the sensitive, earnest, truth-seeking man, and who does not ignore the claims and challenge of Religion, but has to find a good and valid reason for remaining a sceptic.

The sceptic, therefore, must and does make a choice between two clear, definite, intellectually respectable positions. To quote Prof. More:

Looking at religion from the outside, he will say that the whole range of beliefs can be explained as pure undemonstrable inference . . . not an inference from what is outwardly observed or from the mechanism of reason, but a projection into the void, so to speak, of his own feeling of personal freedom, responsibility and purpose.

And the sceptic will go a step further. Perceiving that Christianity alone of religions corresponds with the final data of self-knowledge, he will say that the hard real duel lies between frank materialistic mechanism and the historic teleology of the Logos doctrine to which the Platonic philosophy may be regarded as a sort of preparation.

We shall return to this question of choice. But first we must show just how Professor More, in his gentle effort to convert the sceptic, arrives at his basic conclusion—his religion or his faith. He recognizes the necessity of a firm and solid starting point—of “some element of consciousness which is universal to all men and cannot be honestly disputed.”

That element, according to him, is found in the sense of self-approval or self-reproach which we feel as we act in one way or another. We know, in other words, by an “intuitive affection” that some acts are right and others wrong. The sense we call moral—our conscience—is an integral part of our constitution as human beings. Moreover, it is more than a present feeling; it embraces the future, and is, therefore, teleological. It implies a purpose, a pattern, a way of life, and any serious departure from our purpose brings regret, remorse, a sense of sin, of unworthiness.

Further, these feelings and this teleology of conscience are universal. No human being is without them. No human being lives without some standard of conduct, or escapes remorse if he commits an act at variance with his code of right and wrong.

So much, of course, the sceptic will concede without hesitation. The next step, however, is bound to raise doubts and misgivings.

The data of observation, affirms Professor More, appear to contradict the data of human intuition. There are no signs of purpose in the universe. The natural world, including man, seems to be a series of mechanical actions and reactions. Science, as Spinoza pointed out, is resolutely non-teleological. Which, then, is the illusion, the voice of conscience, or the verdict of observation? Rationalism takes the view that our inward sense of freedom and responsibility is illusory, and that science is the only possible guide of human action, while religion, without repudiating science within a certain wide practical realm, urges us to trust our conscience, defy the logic of observation, and carry over the sense of freedom, responsibility, and purpose into our interpretation of the cosmos. "To faith the whole world thus becomes teleological, and religion is an attempt to live in harmony with a world so conceived."

The sceptic, then, is invited by Professor More to obey the urge in question and accept faith, with the obligation to live in harmony with the dictates of religion. He is bold enough to suggest, indeed, that those sceptics who choose rationalism and reject cosmic teleology do so, perhaps, because they shrink from the obligations of a religious life.

It is unfortunate, by the way, that Professor More refrains from elucidating his conception of the obligations of faith. Had he done this, he would have encountered a great difficulty—namely, that, in the first place, many sceptics and Agnostics do live up to the mandates of what he calls faith, and, in the second place, that millions of men and women who call themselves religious do *not* live up to those mandates.

How does he explain the case of those who observe the obligations of the religious life, socially and morally, while clinging to rationalism? He cannot accuse *these* of indolence, of timidity, of love of ease, of selfishness, of fear of adventure and risk. He must face the embarrassing fact that these men and women simply do not feel the urge to carry over their intuitive affection, their sense of right and wrong, of freedom, into their interpretation of the cosmos.

Professor More truly says that all human beings have standards of conduct, and at times a sense of sin and remorse, but it is obviously *not* true that all human beings feel the urge to accept faith or religion and thus attribute purpose to the cosmos.

True, as Professor More asserts, there *is* significance in the fact of the universality of religion. But what of the universality of superstition? And what of the grosser superstitions even in the relatively advanced religious systems? What do these facts prove?

It was doubtless a mistake for Spencer or for others to suppose that some one cause—dreams, for example, or the appearance of ghosts, or the trials and burdens of life on earth—produced religion. Many causes must have combined to develop the several religious systems, with the belief in a sort of personal immortality, in a heaven, in a personal creator interested particularly in the down-trodden and disinherited.

The only question which demands the attention of educated persons concerns the validity and the reasonableness of the essential affirmations of the two or three religions recognized as advanced and free from the most puerile and absurd superstitions. Professor More accepts Christianity, including the dogma of incarnation. He even asserts that Christianity has said the last word on the subject of God, human destiny, salvation, and redemption, and that no further evolution is possible in fundamental religious thought.

But in making these claims he chooses to ignore the fact that Agnosticism as one form of scepticism is becoming all but universal among educated and cultivated men. The Agnostics do not feel the urge to accept any faith, and least of all the dogma of incarnation and redemption. They cannot make the leap involved in acceptance of the idea that God condescended "to enter personally into his creation and to be born as man among men." They can form no image or idea of God; they cannot believe that Jesus of Nazareth was "the son of God"; they cannot believe that Jesus died to save the human race, or that that race is saved in any sense of the word.

The Agnostic says: I simply cannot pretend to believe the statements [attributed to Jesus] on which Christianity is based, and if he made them, he was misinterpreting mental and physical phenomena which the science of his day did little to elucidate.

Jesus, to the Agnostic, as to many others, was a prophet and reformer who used the language of other Hebrew prophets, but who offended the great majority of the Jews by his "blasphemy"

and who aroused the suspicions and fears of the Roman authorities by his activities as preacher and agitator, since some of his followers believed that he would restore David's regime.

As to the assertion regarding God, the creator of the world, or the divine purpose in this creation, or the special mission of the human race, the Agnostic says, I do not know and cannot possibly know. I am under no compulsion to make the choice between mechanism, necessitarianism, or materialism, and "faith," in the Christian significance of that term. I humbly plead total inability to solve the great mystery of the universe and of life, and the explanations offered by the religions of the world strike me as naïve and childish. Faith, you tell me, is the great adventure, but, while I love adventure, I cannot embark upon any enterprise which my reason and my knowledge of history condemn. Without adventure, civilization declines and perishes, you insist. Very well, let us undertake the eradication of injustice and wrong in human society, establish peace and good will, and make life worth living. Here, surely, is adventure enough!

But, Professor More may ask, to what do you attribute your "instinctive affection" of freedom and responsibility, and your inescapable sense of sin if you commit a deed you know to be wrong? Are you willing to plead total ignorance of that, too, and rest content?

No. The Agnostic has some theories that tentatively answer these questions. In the first place, the sense of freedom is often illusory, the result of a mere confusion of wishes, plans, and motives. Upon analysis, it turns out in many cases that there is no freedom at all. Pending search and analysis, we imagine we are free to act.

For example, one may feel free to defraud somebody and to congratulate oneself upon resisting the temptation. But what will analysis disclose? The resistance to the particular temptation is often the result of fear—fear of detection, punishment, disgrace—and of a much heavier eventual loss than the gain promised by the fraud. It may be in part the result of education, habit, and environment.

One may feel free to take an expensive vacation and withhold aid from needy and deserving relatives or friends. But, upon analysis, one finds that he is not really free to take that course. The neglected relatives and friends will suffer, write pitiful and pathetic letters, which will be painful to read. To escape that pain, one renounces the pleasure of the expensive vacation.

Where, in the end, the strongest motive prevails, or the deepest wish, there is no freedom of action. The word freedom in this connection is meaningless. We are bundles of desires, passions, aspirations, ambitions, apprehensions. We love, we hate, we please others by pleasing ourselves, and please ourselves by pleasing others. We are social animals, members of an organic whole. Yet our socialization is a recent achievement, and our altruism is not fully developed. Our lives betray our origin and the heritage we are but slowly modifying.

Agnosticism does not undermine social morality, and human sympathy and benevolence need no supernatural sanctions.

To return to the social and moral obligations imposed, as Professor More tells us, by religion. What are these obligations? He gives no specifications, but in speaking of morality he says: "I see not where we are to look for principles of conduct more fundamental than the purity and humility and love exemplified in the life of Jesus." We infer, then, that Christianity imposes upon men the obligations of purity, humility, and love. Let us examine these obligations.

What is meant by purity? Purity of what? Of motive, doubtless. It cannot mean absolute chastity, or racial suicide. But what is meant by pure motives? Obviously, disinterested, unselfish motives. In other words, altruism. But absolute altruism, as Spencer has shown, is an utter impossibility. We must love ourselves at least as much as our neighbors and fellow-men. Besides, you cannot love others merely because you are commanded to love them. Love is an emotion, and we cannot force ourselves to experience that emotion toward those who repel us or leave us indifferent. We love but few, though we may like a good many.

Modern thinkers, therefore, rightly hold that by love Jesus meant practical helpfulness, friendliness, cooperation. All religious and moral systems not based on denial of life teach and enjoin these primary virtues. Society cannot exist without them. Hate, antipathy, division, isolation spell the end of civilization. Christianity has no monopoly of the primary virtues, and never had.

What is meant by humility? Not false modesty, not willful blindness to one's intellectual and moral qualities. Genius and talent are facts. He who has them, has them, and should make the best use of them. Jesus did. Other great men did, and we do not accuse them of want of humility. Of course, false pride,

arrogance, snobishness, conceit are vices. What moral system lauds or encourages these vices? None.

Professor More's phrase is rhetorical and empty. No sceptic or Agnostic shrinks from the obligations he mentions, in so far as they have any significance or any application to the problems of social life.

What obligations does Christianity impose upon the modern employer, the modern banker, the modern broker, the modern professional man, the modern farmer, modern wage-worker? Is capitalism Christian; is fascism, or communism, or individualism? We know that there are sincere Christians who believe in capitalism and equally sincere Christians who believe in collectivism of one type or another. Revelation, so-called, is silent on these burning questions, and finite, limited, groping mortals are confused and divided. Jesus will not solve the problem, since he has to be interpreted, and the interpreters cannot agree, and never will.

The God hypothesis is equally useless to us in our crisis. What happens, happens. Either God is indifferent to human affairs, or else he has ends we cannot possibly grasp or even dimly understand. The German followers of Hitler who repudiate Jesus, because he was a Jew, and the gospels, because they were written by Jews, and Christianity, because it cannot rationally be divorced from Judaism, profess to believe in God, or gods, but are plainly reverting to paganism. Is their movement "providential"? or is it contrary to the intents and aims of the Christian God, and of the mission of Jesus?

These questions are not flippant. They are answered, as we know, in accordance with one's reading of history, including the history of religion, and one's philosophy of life. Revelation, alas, does not reveal anything to those who cannot accept the idea of revelation, to begin with, and who see that the alleged revelations can be, and are, interpreted in all manner of ways, so that, in the end, the revelations merely indorse and sanction the notions, the prejudices and the wishes one brought to the consideration of the whole subject of faith and religion.

No, Professor More is not likely to win a single Agnostic to his conclusions. His approach to religion is a mystic's approach, after all, and not a sceptic's. It is clear that Professor More, despite the best intention, cannot put himself in the sceptic's place and reason

as the logical sceptic, or Agnostic, does. One final illustration of this statement must suffice.

Professor More says: "All things considered, the so-called disbelief of the infidel is an influence which, if honestly examined, demands an act of almost impossible credulity." And again addressing the sceptic, he says: "You ask me to believe that nature has planted in me, and not in me alone, but in all men, desires which I must eradicate as pure deceptions; that I am the victim of a cosmic jest, only the more cruel if unintended; that the ultimate fact of existence is a malignant mockery."

Now, does this describe the position of the Agnostic? Far from it. The Agnostic, believes, first, that as to things which science cannot explain he must suspend judgment, and wait with patience for the results of further study and research, and, second, that certain things appear to be unknowable to us, and that speculation concerning them is idle and futile. *This position demands no act of impossible incredulity.* On the contrary, it is dictated by the hardest of common sense as well as by the spirit of science. As to cosmic jests and implanted wishes that the "infidel" asks us to uproot and forget, what, pray, are they? The desire to live forever? There is no proof that nature has implanted any such desire. It is implanted by early education, not by nature. Nature implants a will to live, but animals have this will as well as men. Are animals victims of cosmic jest? Besides, thousands of men are conscious of no desire for immortality. They cannot even *imagine* immortality.

The Agnostic knows that he does not know, and he is reconciled. The man of faith "hopes," Professor More says, but he does not really know what it is he hopes for. He hopes that life has a meaning; that the cosmos has a purpose, and that the purpose is good, but, after all, these terms are used by him without meaning. He cannot form any conception of a cosmic purpose, and he cannot tell you what "good" means to the cosmos, since it is a purely human conception and it relates solely to human affairs. He is not better off than the Agnostic. He merely deludes himself and thinks he thinks, to use Spencer's phrase, or believes he believes.

The sceptical approach to religion leads to scepticism, to Agnosticism, not to faith.